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"The aromas from the kitchens of our childhood remain when many other things are forgotten": Food Memories in Introductions to Irish Cookbooks

„Zapachy z kuchni naszego dzieciństwa pozostają, podczas gdy wiele innych rzeczy zostaje zapomnianych". Wspomnienia jedzenia we wstępach do irlandzkich książek kucharskich

MARZENA KEATING
Institute of English Studies, Pedagogical University of Cracow, Poland
ORCID ID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9125-8562
e-mail: marzena.keating@up.krakow.pl

Abstract. Situated within the fields of culinary history, memory studies, narrative studies and food studies, this research based upon a qualitative content analysis of the selected introductions to Irish cookbooks aims to outline the significance of food memories in culinary discourses. The analysed food memories, as I argue in the text, can be viewed as representations both of individual and collective accounts. They constitute a part of intangible culinary heritage as they construct the shared image of national cuisine, in this case Irish native cuisine. Furthermore, food memories can provide an alternative view on the history of everyday life and therefore can be treated as microhistories and micronarratives.

Keywords: cookbook introductions, Irish culinary history, Irish cuisine, childhood food memories, nostalgia

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Abstrakt. Usytuowane na pograniczu takich dyscyplin jak historia kulinaria, badania nad pamięcią, badania nad narracją oraz *food studies* niniejsze badania bazujące na jakościowej analizie treści w wybranych wstępach do irlandzkich książek kucharskich mają na celu ukazanie znaczenia wspomnień jedzenia w dyskursach kulinarnych. Analizowane wspomnienia dotyczące jedzenia, jak dowodzę w tekście, mogą być postrzegane jako reprezentacje zarówno indywidualnych, jak i zbiorowych świadectw. Są one częścią nienamacalnego dziedzictwa kulinarnego, ponieważ tworzą wspólny obraz narodowej kuchni, w tym przypadku irlandzkiej. Ponadto wspomnienia jedzenia mogą stanowić alternatywny punkt widzenia dla historii życia codziennego i dlatego mogą być traktowane jako mikrohistorie i mikronarracje.

Słowa kluczowe: wstępy do książek kucharskich, irlandzka historia kulinarna, irlandzka kuchnia, wspomnienia jedzenia z dzieciństwa, nostalgia

1. INTRODUCTION

In the last two decades, the study of memory has gained an increasing amount of attention from scholars in various disciplines (Radstone, Schwarz, 2010; Tumblety, 2013; Tota, Hagen, 2016). Likewise, there has been a growing amount of academic work focused on the relationship between food and memory (Sutton, 2001, 2008; Holtzman, 2006; Janowski, 2012; Abarca, Colby, 2016). While the body of research on memory and on memory and food is quite impressive, the analysis of memory in cookbooks[1] has remained relatively underexamined (Eves, 2005; Tomczak, 2017; Sava, 2021).

Cookbooks themselves have been acknowledged as valuable cultural and historical sources (Wheaton, 1998; Mitchell, 2001; Humble, 2005; Albala, 2012), but not much has been written on cookery books and manuscripts in the Irish context (Clear, 2000, pp. 68–80; Shanahan, 2014; Cashman, 2009, 2016; Mac Con Iomaire, Cashman, 2011). Given that academic consideration of Irish culinary history of the 20th century in general and Irish cookbooks in particular remains sparse, the analysis of memory and food is of particular importance in an Irish context.

Approaching cookbooks from various academic perspectives, scholars have emphasised the significance of the material covered in these culinary texts, whose scope reaches beyond instruction for preparing particular dishes. As Barbara Wheaton, a culinary historian, notes, cookbooks are "rewarding, surprising, and illuminating" (1998, p. 2). Especially informative, as I attempt to illustrate throughout this text, are often overlooked and underestimated introductions to cookbooks. While they might be often neglected by a potential reader, introductions constitute an important part of cookbooks as they provide insight into numerous aspects that can enrich the analysis of culinary history and the history of the cookbook *per se*.

[1] Terms "cookbook" and "cookery book" are used interchangeably by the author.

Waldemar Żarski refers to a few essential aims of introductions, namely "distribution of situational knowledge conditioned by the historical circumstances of the work's creation, explanation of main terms and familiarisation with the structure and content of the text" (2008, p. 140).[2] The author explains that an introduction is a form of the message created by a sender and targeted at a recipient of the text with the intention of encouraging him or her to turn to the main text (Żarski, 2008, p. 138). Significantly, references to food memories frequently occurring in the introductions may effectively serve this purpose. For example, Theodora Fitzgibbon, born in England, a founding member of The Irish Food Writers Guild, a cookery columnist in *The Irish Times* and primarily a prolific author of numerous cookery books, in her introduction to *A Taste of Ireland in Food and Pictures* writes: "We, in Ireland, have long memories: the aromas from the kitchen of our childhood remain when many other things are forgotten. I hope that this little book will revive those memories […]" (1968, p. x). This is an obvious example in which the reference to memory is used as an invitation sent by the author to the reader of the text. The promise of the journey back to one's childhood is highlighted. As all potential readers have some food memories themselves, they find a common ground with the author.[3] As Janet Theophano rightly observes, "often cookbooks have served as a place for readers to remember a way of life no longer in existence or to enter a nostalgic re-creation of a past culture that persists mostly in memory" (2002, p. 8).

Such references to the past, however, cannot be only viewed as an invitation targeted at the reader to undertake their adventure with the text. Michael Rothberg argues that "memory nonetheless captures simultaneously the individual, embodied, and lived side and the collective, social, and constructed side of our relations to the past" (2009, p. 4). Similarly, but in reference to food memories, Deborah Lupton highlights that "individual memory of »banal« events and experiences is not simply the subjective property of individuals but is a part of a shared cultural experience" (1994, p. 668). This observation brings to mind Michael Billig's concept of "banal nationalism" (1995), which is reproduced in everyday life through mundane, habitual and often unnoticed signs and activities. Thus, in line with the aforementioned scholars, this article aims to illustrate that food memories presented in various introductions to Irish cookbooks can be viewed as representations both of individual and collective accounts, which furthermore, provide an image of shared culinary experience. Providing an alternative view on the history of everyday life, food memories can be viewed as microhistories and micronarratives. Therefore,

[2] Translation is made by the author of this paper.

[3] In some cases an author of the introduction may not be an author of the cookbook.

they can further be seen as a part of intangible culinary heritage; they construct the shared image of national cuisine.[4]

Evidence of this was gathered from the introductions of the selected Irish cookbooks,[5] and these are Maura Laverty's *Feasting Galore: Recipes and Food Lore from Ireland* (1961), Francis Mayville Budin's *Recipes from Ireland: Traditional and Modern* (1966), Theodora Fitzgibbon's *A Taste of Ireland: Irish Traditional Food* (1968), Monica Sheridan's *My Irish Cookbook* (1977), Deidre McQuillan's *The Irish Country House Table* (1994), Clare Connery's *Irish Cooking: Over 100 Classic Irish Recipes* (1996) and Darina Allen's *Irish Traditional Cooking* (1998).[6] Due to the abundance of the material,[7] only a few cookbooks have been selected for the analysis of food memories, as presented in the introductions. It is not the aim of this research to provide a comprehensive study of food memories in introductions to Irish cookbooks, but to illustrate on a few chosen examples that food memories are not only the part of oral history but they also function within the written culinary discourse. Situated within the fields of culinary history, memory studies, narrative studies and food studies, this research, based upon a qualitative content analysis of the selected introductions to Irish cookbooks, is intended to both add to a growing number of texts focused on memories in culinary discourses and to enrich the research on Irish culinary history of the 20th century.

2. MEMORIES AND THE IRISH COUNTRYSIDE

Clare Connery, an Irish food writer and a member of The Guild of Food Writers, opens her cookbook *Irish Cooking: Over 100 Classic Irish Recipes* with such a childhood memory:

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[4] In line with other scholars, including Arjun Appadurai (1988) and Igor Cusack (2000), national cuisine in this text is understood as a manifestation of the nation-building process. Cookbooks played an important role in this process. In the Irish context, as Dorothy Cashman observes, great number of Irish-authored and Irish-centred cookery books were published in the decades following the foundation of the Irish Free State in 1922 (2009, pp. 74–75). Nevertheless, it needs to be emphasised that cookbooks, which present national cuisines, are commercially produced and numerous techniques, including references to shared images, are used in order to appeal to potential customers.

[5] While relating to Irish cookbooks, I mean not only Irish-authored cookbooks and cookbooks published in Ireland, but also Irish-centred cookery books.

[6] All cookbooks selected for this research were written by female authors. It is, however, outside the scope of this research to discuss the gendered nature of the memories.

[7] A growing interest in food, together with an increased number of cookbooks devoted primarily to Irish national cuisine can be witnessed from the late 1950s and the early 1960s on. Especially, the improved economic and socio-cultural situation from the mid-1990s provided a particularly fruitful ground for cookbook publishing industry in Ireland.

> This bounty I first experienced as a child, when I sat by the hearth in my Grandmother's farmhouse kitchen and watched her produce wholesome stews, rich roasts, puddings, cakes and a vast variety of bread over a turf fire. Indeed, I can still recall wonderful aromas of this day. I helped her milk cows, feed chickens, turkeys and ducks, pick potatoes, plant vegetables and gather wild berries from the mountain and bog land. Food was always fresh, plentiful and tasty, the quality superb and the variety, in those days, enormous. (1996, p. 7)

With this short extract, the author takes us back to her childhood when in her grandmother's house she experienced memorable moments involving various food-related activities. Such images as grandmother's farmhouse kitchen, food cooked over the hearth, wonderful aromas, picking potatoes and gathering wild berries form a very sensory memory with a strong nostalgic feeling. We can imagine Irish countryside, its beauty and bountifulness and the "good old days" when people used the resources that the nature had provided. There is a narrative of plenty and considerable self-sustenance surrounding Irish rural life in the past. This is often a perspective of a city dweller. As Deidre McQuillan, a freelance journalist and a regular contributor to *The Sunday Tribune* and *Image Magazine*, explains in her introduction to *The Irish Country House Table*: "Like many city people with rural relations, we associated the country with the finest and freshest foodstuffs, with flavours and tastes which made lasting impressions" (1994, p. xiii). The image of rural Ireland presented in many introductions is quite idyllic, but it provides a reader with the feeling of authenticity.

Interestingly, Oona Frawley notes that Irish kitchen and hearth are sometimes entangled in the formation of the authenticity of Irish culinary heritage (2012, p. 233). Irish farmhouse kitchen is viewed as a place where wholesome, fresh and earthy produce of the land was often used in order to prepare some hearty meals over an open fire. This is in evidence in other introductions. For example, Monica Sheridan, Ireland's first television cook, popularly known as "finger licking Monica", in the introduction to *My Irish Cookbook* provides a description of her great-grandmother's kitchen "with the big turf fire burning on the hearth" (1977, p. xi), and Darina Allen, an Irish chef, food writer, TV personality and founder of Ballymaloe Cookery School, in the introduction to *Irish Traditional Cooking* relates to her great-aunt cooking over the open turf fire (1998, p. 6). In the case of Sheridan, her childhood memories would have embraced the period of the 1920s and early 1930s as she was born in 1912, when most of the cooking was carried over the open fire. Descriptions by Connery and Allen relate to the 1950s as both authors were born only a year apart, Connery in 1947 and Allen in 1948. While cooking on the range was gaining popularity at the time, Joanna Bourke notes that in Ireland "as late as 1944, only 40 per cent of households cooked over a range, another 40 per cent cooked over an open hearth, and the remaining 20 per cent over

an open grate" (1993, p. 219). Hence, cooking over an open fire must have been still quite common in the 1950s and 1960s, especially in rural Ireland.

Similarly to Connery, Allen in the introduction to her cookbook refers to her "magical Irish country childhood" in a village called Cullohill (1998, p. 6). As in the example from Connery's introduction, Allen refers to the quality of produce used in the countryside, farmhouse animals and preparation of home-made meals. What seems to be at stake in Allen's memory, that does not feature in Connery's, is, however, commensality. The author mentions that there were nine of them so the big table was necessary in such a case. While she does not describe any particular moment at the table, she captures the importance of consuming meals together viewed as a quintessential activity within family life carried on an everyday basis. David Sutton stresses that "ritual is a key site where food and memory come together, but this should not blind us to the importance of everyday contexts of memory" (2001, p. 19). Significant events, for example, Christmas or birthdays, do not feature in the analysed food memories. Apparently mundane moments are those that become an important site for the construction of long lasting memories.

Furthermore, Allen covers the significance of living within a broader social circle of community, which is illustrated by the memory of neighbours helping each other during the hay season. As shown by the author, food accompanied various farming activities, especially during the harvest: "Threshing was still done with a steam machine, and I well remember bringing sweet tea and spotted dog out to the men in the field, and helping to cook the enormous threshing dinner" (1998, p. 6). The author gives an account of a very common custom of preparing and bringing food to the farmers during the threshing season. Focusing on midwestern states of the USA, Mary Neth calls the threshing dinner "the heart of the community threshing experience" (1995, p. 154). This illustrates that women's role in the process of threshing production went beyond simple provision of meals to the workers. It exposed the ability to maintain and strengthen bonds within given communities.

In her introduction Allen discloses other memories related to her summer experiences on the uncle's farm in Tipperary, where the family often spent their holidays. She calls it "an absolutely enchanting place", explaining that it was "a big working farm on the edge of the bog, where they made their own butter, killed their own pigs and made black and white puddings" (1998, p. 6). While this is a narrative of considerable self-sustenance surrounding rural life, Allen directly states that "the family was virtually self-sufficient up to the early 1960s" (1998, p. 6). Food related activities mentioned by her also give an account of important traditions carried out from generation to generation within rural Irish communities. Although Allen only enlists the activities of butter making and killing of the pig as examples indicating the self-sufficiency of the family, due to their significance in the Irish tradition, they

are at least worthy of our notice. Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire explains that killing of the pig constituted a significant social event in the Irish countryside as neighbours helped each other with this endeavour and shared the fresh meat as well as the prepared puddings (2003, p. 210). Such activity illustrates a socially positive nature of food that is able to bring people together, as in the cases of making hay or harvesting.

Butter-making is also important as Ireland has prided itself on butter production.[8] It features in Sheridan's introduction where she refers to her great-grandmother, her grandmother and finally her mother churning their own butter (1977, pp. xi–xiii). The description of Sheridan's great-grandmother's churn is especially memorable and illustrates how it was seen from the perspective of a child: "the old dash churn stood, like a dragon, in a dim corner […]" (1977, p. xii). Cathal Cowan and Regina Sexton acknowledge the very long history of butter production in Ireland, explaining that it is very likely that its history can be traced back to the Neolithic period (1997, p. 94). While killing of the pig was mainly a male task, however, women's duty was to cure and smoke the meat (Mac Con Iomaire, 2003, p. 211), until the end of the 19th century solely women were responsible for butter-making (Cowan and Sexton, 1997, pp. 95–96). Thus, such activities are also crucial for the discussion of gender division of domestic labour within the food context.

The image of rural Ireland portrayed by Allen is very similar to Connery's, yet more insightful. The author achieves it also through the juxtaposition of this idyllic rural life with what was to follow, namely the more commercialised way of life with shop-bought products (1998, p. 6). Allen relates to a few innovations, including packet, tinned and frozen foods, which "jeopardised" "a whole food tradition" (1998, p. 6). While at the beginning such items were viewed as novel and favoured over their home-made equivalents, Allen herself started to "question the wisdom of this food revolution" (1998, p. 6). While such transformations are often viewed as time and labour saving, they are also blamed for the loss of traditional culinary skills. Looking at the author's personal memories from her childhood, it comes as no surprise that Allen is a keen advocate of organic food and a strong opponent of GM technology (Sage, 2003, p. 57).

3. IRISH CULINARY HERITAGE: DISHES AND AROMAS

Sheridan in her introduction claims that her great-grandmother's kitchen is "a good starting point from which to trace the development of our [Irish] native cuisine" (1977, p. xi). Thus, it can be argued that foods and dishes mentioned by the

[8] On the industrial production of butter, see: Lysaght, 2004.

authors in the selected introductions are not arbitrary. They seem to form a shared image of Irish culinary heritage. References to potatoes (Sheridan, 1977, p. xv; McQuillan, 1994; Connery, 1996, p. 7; Allen, 1998, p. 7) seem to be of particular importance as despite the tragedy of the Great Irish Famine, the potato has never ceased to play an important part in Irish cuisine, which is illustrated by various national and regional dishes featuring this produce, for example, champ, colcannon, boxty, Coddle and potato cake, to mention only a few.[9] While Darra Goldstein argues that in the Irish context "all too often the story begins and ends with potatoes or famine" (2014, p. xii), Irish cuisine, which is reflected in the selected cookbook introductions, has much more to offer than just potato-based dishes. McQuillan stresses that "Ireland is rich in its raw materials – incomparable seafood, its fine lamb, pork, beef and game, not to mention its butter, cream and other dairy products" (1994, p. xiii). Connery's references to stews, puddings and bread can bring to mind some traditional Irish dishes, for example, Irish stew, Christmas pudding and many varieties of home-made breads and cakes that Ireland can pride itself on (1996, p. 7).

Sweet treats which are commonly associated with comfort and childhood also feature in the introductions. McQuillan remembers that her aunt "transformed eggs, sugar, butter and flour into endless childish delights – iced chocolate cakes, feather-light sponge cakes, »patty« cakes, Swiss rolls, madeiras and breads" (1994, p. xiii). Sheridan recollects ammonia buns, whose smell brings her back to her grandmother's kitchen. In reference to them she exclaims: "Talk about Proust and his *madeleine!*" (1977, p. xiii). As the narrator in Marcel Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*,[10] the memory of Sheridan's distant past is relived once more in the presence. While ammonia buns have never been seen again or made by Sheridan, who admits to not knowing how to make them, they are still very vivid in her memories.

Smell seems to be of considerable importance in childhood food memories. Sheridan provides a detailed account of olfactory experience from her childhood:

> I can still remember the delicious smells that came out of that wondrous kitchen – sugared ham browning in front of the fire; hot toast, speared on a fork and held in front of the red coals; strong tea brewing on a corner of the stove and ammonia buns coming out of the hot oven on a frosty day. (1977, p. xiii)

[9] As the discussion of various traditional Irish dishes is beyond the scope of this research, see, for example: Cowan, Sexton, 1997; Sexton, 1998.

[10] Book I (1934), in original *À la recherche du temps perdu*, also translated as *In Search of Lost Time*.

Connery recalls the aroma that pervaded the house when home-made bread was made over the turf fire (1996, p. 7). The significance of the sense of smell is highlighted by Anthelme Brillat-Savarin who states: "I am not only convinced that there is no full act of tasting without the participation of the sense of smell, but I am also tempted to believe that smell and taste form a single sense" ([1825] 2009, p. 49). Similarly, David Sutton (2001, p. 17) and Jon Holtzman (2006, p. 365) explain that power of food memories stems from the fact that food influences all senses. The power of food memories is illustrated by cookery writers as they can still remember various aromas experienced during their childhood. While these are unique experiences, which can be intimate and emotionally charged, at the same time, they are considerably universal and shared culturally. Various aromas associated with specific food stir up nostalgic emotions and memories, especially from one's childhood.

Nostalgic remembrances are particularly significant in the migrant context as the sensory properties of food play a key role "in reconnecting and remembering experiences and places one has left behind" (Sutton, 2001, p. 74). Sutton acknowledges the ability of food to bring back the "homeland" (2001, p. 17). Through eating, Kalymnians who have left their homelands are able to evoke home, and thus preserve their distinctive identity. How food acts as a reminder of national identity is illustrated through the stories of Kalymnians in Athens, England and America longing for the remembered taste of various foods from home. Similarly, on the basis of in-depth interviews with first generation Irish female migrants in Coventry, Moya Kneafsey and Rosie Cox illustrate how certain Irish foods remembered from home are desired by the respondents (2002, pp. 9–14).

The importance of food memories in the context of migration is in evidence in the two selected forewords: to Laverty's[11] cookbook entitled *Feasting Galore: Recipes and Food Lore from Ireland* (1961)[12] and to Budin's *Recipes from Ireland: Traditional and Modern* (1966). The "Foreword" to *Feasting Galore* is written by Robert Briscoe who states: "I believe that *Feasting Galore* will carry the nostalgic and appetizing aroma of the Irish kitchen to our exiles all over the world" (1961, n.p.). Gaynor Maddox introducing Budin's cookbook states that "some of the finest things to eat in the world are grown in Ireland" (1966, p. v). As an example of Irish cuisine, Maddox refers to Irish stew, which is "»authentic« only when made the way one's mother back in the Old Country used to make it" (1966, p. v). Importantly, both forewords invite potential readers, mainly of Irish decent, to explore these

[11] Maura Laverty was a very well-known playwright, an author of several novels, a cookery writer and a political activist. In Radio Éireann she was a cookery correspondent and agony aunt on the ESB sponsored programme.

[12] *Feasting Galore* was an American version of Laverty's cookbook entitled *Full and Plenty*.

cookbooks, try and test the recipes included in them in order to travel back in time to their homeland. The persuasive function is clearly visible here. Cookbooks written by Laverty and Budin promise to bring the taste of home back to those who have left their home country behind. Warren Belasco explains that when memories of certain foods labelled as ethnic markers are "filtered through the lens of nostalgia, such memories become a way of preserving identities now perceived to be endangered by migration, mobility, and suburban mass culture" (2012, p. 27). Reading about food, thinking about it, recollecting memories and experiences related to food or preparing the dishes associated with the native cuisine can all help to maintain culinary heritage of the homeland.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Calling on sensory and affective qualities of food, descriptions of memories from the selected introductions to Irish cookery books resemble literary narratives. This should come as no surprise as cookbooks, whose real value has resided in their ability to offer pleasure to the readers, have a lot in common with literary texts. For instance, Anne Bower argues that community cookbooks can be read as fiction because they have such components of literature as settings, characters and plot (1997, pp. 29–50). Agnieszka Bąbel, whose academic research concerns history of literary and non-literary texts, suggests: "Maybe it's worth treating a cookbook and a household guide as a colourful and interesting annex, enabling us to recognise belittled or even completely ignored areas of the literature of a given epoch" (2000, p. 230).

Whether viewed as a part of literary or/and culinary discourses, the analysed fragments of food memories reveal the importance of individual stories of the *madeleine*. However, as illustrated, food memories cannot be only regarded as individual experiences because since they are culturally mediated, they constitute "a shared cultural experience" (Lupton, 1994, p. 668). Food memories are socially and culturally constructed, and thus they contribute to the attainment of cultural identity, especially important in the context of migration. Such accounts when shared with others, whether orally or in the published form, can construct the image of culinary heritage that can be shared within a given group, community or even a nation.

Nevertheless, when viewing cookbooks and food memories as historical and cultural sources, we need to remember that such materials pose some limitations. Monica Janowski states that "food memories should not be seen as straightforward accounts of what really happened" (2012, p. 177), whereas Ken Albala explains that "cookbooks are rarely if ever accurate descriptions of what people actually ate at any

given time and place" (2012, p. 229). While food memories and cookbooks cannot be simply viewed as reliable guides to the past, they enable researchers to address a wide array of issues which have often been marginalised from the perspective of grand narratives. As it has been illustrated, food and memory analysed together can shed light on a broad spectrum of cultural concerns, including senses, nostalgia and formation of culinary identity. Such memories provide a powerful insight into past experiences and form a compelling part of emotional narratives of the individuals and groups. What seems to be at stake is not what exactly happened in the past but the emotions that can be elicited through the medium of consumption.

Furthermore, food memories presented in the introductions have nostalgic resonances, but the recipes included on the following pages of the cookbook can become a part of the present or future food-making practices. While this article focused on the past, it becomes evident that the link between the past memories and experiences with the present and the future constitutes a worthy theme for the future research.

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